

# Drawing Lessons from the Past

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# Drawing Lessons from the Past: Mapping Change in Central and South-Eastern Europe

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This introductory article to the special section on “Europe’s Changing Lessons from the Past” argues for a close analysis of acts of public remembrance in Central and Eastern European countries in order to uncover the link between the issue of public memory and long-term processes of democratisation. In countries facing a period of transition after the experience of war and dictatorship, the debate over its memory is usually as much a debate about a divisive past as it is about the future. While it is part of a sensitive political scrutiny that is related to different ideas on how to ensure sustainable peace, it also provides the basis for the recreation of a common sense of belonging and identity. The often resulting coexistence of different memory traditions creates two clearly identifiable levels of conflict: one on the national level and one on the supranational one. In mapping change in Central and Eastern Europe, this special section aims at making the connections between the two visible by on the one hand questioning the sociological turn in Memory and EU Studies and on the other, pinpointing the necessity to concentrate on processes and not only on their results.

**Keywords:** *public memory; remembrance; European Union; Central and South-Eastern Europe; WWII*

Memory is about the past as much as it is about the present and the future. It is about interpreting historical events in the context of contemporary political needs and values. Memory gets used and abused; it is subject and tool at the same time. It has been described both as vehicle for community building<sup>1</sup> and as battlefield.<sup>2</sup> Its close connection to identity makes it a crucial element in the formation of nation states, while its transformative power renders it prone to political instrumentalisation. Nowhere does this double face of memory become more visible than in Central and South-Eastern Europe. In the so-called Bloodlands,<sup>3</sup> where different totalitarian regimes have left their traces, memories of the past are being mobilised to both (re) create a sense of national belonging and, at the same time, provoke struggles of interpretation. Compared to Western Europe, where the Holocaust has become the focal point for the formation of democratic principles and values, in Central and South-Eastern Europe, the different layers of experiences during and after WWII created a tangled web of overlapping recollections and interpretations. It is particularly the memory of warfare, occupation, war crimes, and persecution during both

World Wars that runs parallel to the one of famine, ethnic conflict, and political persecution under Communism and Socialism.

The complexity of those memories becomes particularly evident during acts of public remembrance. It is through the commemoration of past atrocities and the official recognition of victims that individual and social recollections become institutionally anchored and subsequently turn into public memory. Not only are those the moments when a victorious army and its fallen soldiers are honoured, when civilian victims are mourned, and their sacrifices acknowledged, but it is also the moment when the nation is celebrated with the underlying aim of strengthening national identity and the coherence of society.<sup>4</sup> The latter element is of particular importance in new states that have re-emerged after a devastating war or face a period of transition from one form of government to the next. It is due to the fact that memory has been a crucial element in the formation of modern nation states and still plays an important role in their political and social consolidation. This would explain why we can find an especially pronounced form of re-evaluation and re-creation of history in countries in transition. A number of studies have indeed highlighted the link between the issue of public remembering and the long-term processes of democratisation.<sup>5</sup> It can be observed in many Latin-American post-authoritarian societies but also across the whole former Eastern bloc. Here public memory since 1989 gets restructured along the condemnation of the communist/socialist past and the recreation of former democratic traditions.

The aim of this—often fundamental—makeover of history is to create a usable past that can serve as a suitable foundation for a newfound democracy on the one hand while providing the basis for reconciliation and regional stability on the other. The latter plays a particularly important role in South-Eastern European countries where feelings of a common identity and belonging have been under severe strain during a previous armed conflict between different ethno-national groups. In these states especially, reconciliation has a concrete political meaning that is closely connected to diplomatic relations, the normalization of state relations, official apology, and institutional integration. As in the post-Soviet countries, it is part of a sensitive political debate that is related to different ideas on how to ensure sustainable peace. In both the post-Yugoslav and the post-Soviet context, the battle over the legacy of the war is thus often as much a debate over a divisive past as it is about the future. It is thus not too surprising that as soon as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union disintegrated, the newly emerging countries started to break away from the memory traditions formed during the extended period of shared statehood.<sup>6</sup>

Several authors in this special section trace this development in their contributions focusing on an aspect that plays a crucial role in the analysis of memory cultures, namely, that the coexistence of different memory traditions creates two clearly identifiable levels of conflict: one on the national level and one on the supranational one. The first level of conflict is closely connected to the variance between the very complex individual and social memories present in post-communist and post-socialist

countries that clash with the often artificial recreation of a uniform public interpretation of history put forward by political and social elites. The result are discussions and, in some cases, outright fights between different groups in society over the legacy of the past and the “correct lessons” to be drawn from it. The second level of conflict results from the concurrence of different memory frames on the supranational level and the thus resulting discussions on the potential comparability and equivalence of different regimes. The latter often translates into the simple juxtaposition of East and West, leading to fierce debates in those venues where representatives from different countries meet, namely, the European Parliament, the European Court of Human Rights, the Council of Europe, and the International Criminal Court.<sup>7</sup> Here the question is less which version of history should become dominant but more which status those different versions have within the European framework of remembrance.

What is often overlooked by most existing studies but what is clearly addressed in this special section is the fact that the two levels are closely connected. Discussions on the national level do not only usually precede struggles on the supranational one, they are also often conducted in light of the wider European and international framework. War experiences tend to get presented within a discourse of general European reconciliation. Particularly in those countries of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia who have not acceded to the European Union yet but are aspiring EU member candidates, this tendency is very strong. By underlining the European dimension of the experience of war and occupation during public commemorations, political actors are able to request the recognition of sacrifices on the one hand while sending a strong pro-European signal towards their respective electorate, legitimising that way the political agenda of the government, on the other. The declared aim is to clearly demonstrate the country’s Europeanism and to situate the nation firmly within a European memory community.

The question is what this community looks like. Does a uniform European community of memory actually exist? Since its foundation, the EU has certainly seen reconciliation and coming to terms with the past as a cornerstone of its identity narrative.<sup>8</sup> It is considered to be a European value that gets promoted also through its foreign policy. Since the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s, the EU’s politics of enlargement and EU accession have largely been framed in terms of reconciliation. The ability of a nation to face up to its past has become some sort of soft entry ticket to the Union. What exactly this ability characterises is, however, not quite clear. There seem to be no fixed standards on how to effectively deal with the memory of past atrocities in Europe. This has become particularly evident since 2004, after the accession of several Central and Eastern European countries to the EU. The Eastern enlargement extended the EU’s memory agenda and posed a number of new challenges to the Union. The arrival of new actors in European institutions led to an open questioning of the prevailing Western European narrative constructed on the uniqueness of the Holocaust as the epitome of evil.<sup>9</sup> Despite the diversification of viewpoints with and the ensuing discussions about the moral and political equivalence of

different totalitarian regimes, the crimes of Communism and Stalinism have remained strangely absent from the European framework of memory and identity that lie at the heart of a unifying sense of community. The double legal standards that are applied when dealing with the Nazi and the Communist past seem to point to a dualism in European collective memory that is not easy to overcome.

Since the end of the Cold War, the EU has nevertheless tried to foster the standardisation of memory politics through various initiatives.<sup>10</sup> While the European Parliament passed six recommendations and resolutions between 1993 and 2009 specifically addressing the question of how to publicly confront the experiences of WWII, the Commission paved the way for concrete funding policies: With an overall budget of €215 million, Action 4 of the “Europe for Citizens” programme is dedicated exclusively to issues of “Active European Remembrance.” Its main objective is to foster “action, debate and reflection related to European citizenship and democracy, shared values, common history and culture, and bringing Europe closer to its citizens by promoting Europe’s values and achievements, while preserving the memory of its past.”<sup>11</sup> If the European Parliament has concentrated on the framing of memory issues through its legal texts, the Commission evidently tries to use the realm of memory as a mechanism for public sphere formation.

Institutions undoubtedly play an important role in memory politics. They shape the way national policies are formulated and contribute to the public understanding of the past. While the Commission, the European Parliament, and the Justice and Home Affairs Council engage mainly in symbolic politics, the European Court of Human Rights and the International Criminal Court have started to play an active role in the formulation of standards and norms. Both are seen as important creators of authoritative historical records of war and conflict and as catalysts for reconciliation. Through the institutionalisation of rules and procedures, they directly or indirectly contribute to the definition of historical injustices and the lessons drawn from them. They thus influence the way in which politicians, opinion leaders, and citizens perceive and evaluate the past. The question is if (judicial) institutions can effectively establish historical truths and if they have the power and legitimacy to correct historical wrongs. Several contributions to this special section try to find a tentative answer to this question.

Which role have history and memory played during the transition of Central and South-Eastern European countries from a communist/socialist regime to democracy? How has the meaning of the so-called “lessons from the past” changed over time in different parts of the continent? What is the process through which they are revived and reanimated in different institutional venues? How is their relevance to the present disputed? What happens when different frames of memory meet? Those questions stand at the heart of this special section on “Europe’s changing lessons from the past.” All contributions address this particular dynamic. Despite the fact that they deal with different countries and analyse developments during different time periods, the tensions between the social and the official level, between the national and the

supranational, between East and West, run like a red thread through all the articles. While focusing on the discursive dynamic of memory constructions in different case studies, the authors effectively question the sociological turn in Memory and EU Studies, and pinpoint the necessity to concentrate on processes and not only on their results.

Anita Kurimay's paper "Interrogating the Historical Revisionism of the Hungarian Right: the Queer Case of Cécile Tormay" deals with renegotiation of the legacy of the Horthy interwar regime.<sup>12</sup> It examines the historical processes that lead to the reevaluation of Cécile Tormay—a fierce anticommunist, anti-Semite, and staunch nationalist writer and founder of Hungary's conservative women's movement—uncovering the political reasons for her re-emergence. Having been a national icon already during her lifetime, rehabilitation of her memory is according to Kurimay closely connected to a general decisive shift in Hungarian politics away from a pro-Western stance to an almost hostile attitude towards Western liberalism. It explains why contemporary conservative Hungarian politicians started to re-embrace her as the ideal patriotic figure that embodied the irredentist, nationalist, and anti-Semitic values in spite of Tormay's personal life, which represented everything conservatives and the far right were advocating against. Kurimay's paper thus vividly demonstrates how memory can be harnessed and legacies revised for political purposes, adapting them to contemporary political needs.

Tea Andersen's contribution to this special issue, "Lessons from Sarajevo and the First World War: From Yugoslav to National Memories," similarly studies the central cultural and political function of memory and commemoration.<sup>13</sup> It analyses the way the shared and divided memory of WWI has been written into the national narratives of Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia and traces in particular the changes this memory has undergone since the disintegration of the Yugoslav state. Andersen's paper thus shows vividly how the creation of a unifying public memory of the war can be used to strengthen the coherence of a new state while sending an appeal to the international community to recognize its sacrifices. If in the case of Hungary the revival of the past is used to underpin the move away from Europe and European values, the analysis shows that in former Yugoslavia almost the opposite is the case: war experiences are narrated within a wider European context in order to situate the post-Yugoslav nations firmly within a European memory community and to legitimize the pro-European agenda of the current government.

Heleen Touquet's and Peter Vermeersch's article "Changing Frames of Reconciliation: The Politics of Peace Building in the Former Yugoslavia" highlight the role that institutions and civil society initiatives play in this process.<sup>14</sup> It shows that the question of reconciliation after the devastating Yugoslav wars is part of a sensitive domestic political debate in the context of a possible future EU accession of those countries. By analysing the conflicting frames of reconciliation as expressed by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, the EU enlargement agenda, and civil society initiatives, it analyses memory and reconciliation as political practice through current discussions on transitional justice and enlargement. It shows

to what extent the idea of reconciliation is closely linked to different ideas on how to ensure sustainable peace. The deeper question underlying this analysis is the one of whether judicial institutions can establish historical truths.

This is also the topic of Aleksandra Gliszczyńska-Grabias's paper on "Communism Equals or versus Nazism? Europe's Unwholesome Legacy in Strasbourg."<sup>15</sup> It investigates the attempt by the European Court of Human Rights to establish a legal standard of how to deal with the effects of human rights violations in the past. It demonstrates that the Court was not very successful in creating norms and principles applicable to the Communist past despite the fact that it could rely on the ones that had already been established in relation to the Nazi past. By discussing three different court cases dealing with the public presence of Communist symbols and insignia, the emergence of neo-Communist parties, and the exercise of electoral rights of former Communist party members, Gliszczyńska-Grabias's analysis uncovers a broader dualism in European collective memory that refuses to establish any form of equivalence between the two totalitarian regimes.

Marek Kucia exposes this asymmetry further in his article "The Europeanization of Holocaust Memory and Eastern Europe."<sup>16</sup> He analyses the construction, institutionalisation, and diffusion of norms regarding Holocaust remembrance at the European level since the 1990s and investigates their incorporation in the value system of the post-communist Eastern European countries. He argues that the interplay of different internationally operating memory agents created a dense network of transnational organizations that was able to contribute to the Europeanization of Holocaust memory. Instead of producing a transnational monolith, it combined a set of national Holocaust memories sharing some common traits. This arguably made it easier for Central and Eastern European countries to adapt to and incorporate the developed rules and norms into their own remembrance practices.

He thus returns to the main questions that have guided investigations in the other contributions: the preconditions for reconciliation and transition to democracy, the exemplary character that West-European reconciliation had for South-Eastern Europe, the role that politicians, citizens and institutions have in the re-evaluation of history and the problematic dualism existing in European memory cultures. All articles of the special section on 'Europe's Changing Lessons from the Past' highlight those issues in an exemplary way. By analysing memory dynamics in a geographic area that only recently has started to raise broad scholarly interest, the different authors of this special section effectively uncover the link between the issue of public memory and long-term processes of democratisation. Considering discussions on the use and abuse of history and memory during the ongoing Ukraine crisis, further investigations into the two identified levels of conflict have recently acquired an unexpected degree of urgency. The aim of this special section is to contribute to those discussions by providing the basis for a novel understanding of how historical events are interpreted in the context of changing political needs and values in Central and South-Eastern Europe.



## Notes

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10. See A. Sierp, *History, Memory, and Trans-European Identity: Unifying Divisions* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
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13. T. Andersen, "Lessons from Sarajevo and the First World War—From Yugoslav to National Memories," *East European Politics and Societies* 30 (2016): 34–54.
14. H. Touquet and P. Vermeersch, "Changing Frames of Reconciliation: The Politics of Peace Building in the Former Yugoslavia," *East European Politics and Societies* 30 (2016): 55–73.
15. A. Gliszczyńska-Grabias, "Communism Equals or versus Nazism? Europe's Unwholesome Legacy in Strasbourg," *East European Politics and Societies* 30 (2016): 74–96.
16. M. Kucia, "The Europeanization of Holocaust Memory and Eastern Europe," *East European Politics and Societies* 30 (2016): 107–119.

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